

# HAITI

A POEM

Steven Frattali

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"Afterword: Encounters with the Author in Taipei and Environs"  
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## HAITI

A portal in the air opens and I look down from 40,000 feet,  
the ocean lies far beneath, a bright slate green, and  
a few ships the size of pin heads, each one with a  
white thread behind it, and we descend in layers of  
air, in gigantic stair steps

The Caribbean Sea, crossed and re-crossed with  
instruments and symbols, sea crowded with history  
and with voices slashing like knives, knives of metal  
and of parchment and paper

And now it is the provincial capital and we are watching  
the sun sink down into the ocean, in the slanted light  
in the courtyards the images are arriving, stone lions  
shaken from the great hive of the sun appear in the  
dusty twilight of the empty streets, they are the lions  
of disaster, of catastrophe, of change

The mist of the earthquake fills the valley like a white fog,  
the waves of white haze flow up in a dust cloud, it is  
a thick dust and filmy with a strange aura in the  
bright gray light that fills the overcast day, a winter  
day in the Caribbean

and the lead green hills around seem to shake, the ground  
itself is moving, it is like being on a ship's deck, on  
the roof of a car that's being driven across a field, it  
is like a man raising himself up as you stand on top  
of him

the sky dips into the ground, the ground slams up to you,  
the world tilts like a plane banking, it flows and  
stamps like a small boat in surf, there is a fog of grit  
all through the air that tastes like chalk

the waves are inside the earth, the sea that the city floated  
on is itself drawn away, removed like a tablecloth  
dragged out from under a place setting

the city is dragged off the table's edge, the ground itself is  
the cloth gathering up, the earth is poured out from  
under the buildings the streets and squares, the  
houses are poured out from under the people

Columns walls falling across sunlight, floors buckling and  
splitting, buildings of concrete and steel smashing  
like stacks of dropped plates, whole apartment  
buildings smashed like china, the pieces scattered  
around

The ground is moving underneath the city, the ground is  
still and the sky is turning upside down, the buildings  
are tense, there was a heavy explosion somewhere in  
the earth and the city is trying to flee trembling like  
bottles on a tray, the acrobat buildings are about to  
fall off the ground's trapeze, the buildings are skaters  
losing their balance, but the ice is breaking anyway

Window sill blind sway floor smash crawling dirt grip wall  
roots scrape rocks blood flow of stones pouring metal  
pipes twisted burning ceiling shirt ripped fire smoke  
eyelids throat of dirt dead wood arm leg wood face  
of fire thirst

face of burnt tar legs of crushed stone hanging arm like a  
twig torn open chest torn open stomach leg bent at  
the knee the wrong way like a straw skin tingling  
with ants staring eyes with beetle leg red veins  
staring into the sun pond of blood

split open face of the city broken windshield of the city the  
gutters of roads streaming with crowds hemorrhage  
crowds

desert floor city of blue sky burnt into fissures cracked in  
the furnace of catastrophe hurricane wind of ground  
swell breaking waves of split up roads cars plowed to  
the side face of windshield slashed by the dropped  
balcony railing, building facades collapsed like a  
dead drunk's forehead lying in their vomit of bright  
window shards of upchucked cinder blocks and white  
dust

screams of the city cries of the city stunned bruise  
throbbing mind of the crowds floating in partial  
amnesia, mind like a drilled tooth in collapsing  
fatigue, they have never felt like this before they  
cannot go on with this they cannot see to the end of  
this, bring them up out of this pit where the world has  
fallen, bring them up out of this ditch

Where are the hands that might be extended to them, where  
are the hands that reach out, where is the help? the  
entire blue sky, the lead green hills around, the deep  
horizon reaching out to the Caribbean to the gulf

streams of the Atlantic, there is no help anywhere

When I am tired and thirsty how miserable I am, and when  
I haven't slept how miserable I am, when I have not  
been able to wash or to use a proper bathroom how  
miserable I am, how the world is a vice that presses  
in on me, how the minutes and the hours are like  
dirty water like an aluminum shovel under my head  
like brick dust in my mouth, how other men and  
women are like shadows are mere images

when I am tired and thirsty, when I am dirty and exhausted  
how miserable I am, and when even a small part of  
my body hurts in a small way how troubling it is,  
how I cannot get away from even the slightest pain,  
even the smallest injury

But now there are some who have not drunk water or slept  
or washed in days, who have not eaten who are  
exhausted beyond the worst that I have ever been,  
now there are some who do not have only some small  
pain or minor injury but rather their arms and legs are  
mangled, their bones are broken their skin is abraded  
torn burnt, they have joints twisted and crushed they  
have infections that swell with pus

How important it is for me when I am sick even a little that  
I be able to go to a doctor, but here there are not  
enough doctors and those who are injured have no  
one to help them, there are bones that cannot be set,  
there are burns that cannot have bandages, that  
cannot have water that cannot have pain killers and  
burns are the most painful of wounds

When I love someone how much I want to protect them  
from all harm from all pain or injury, how I would do

anything to help them if they were hurt or sick, when  
I love someone how fragile their body seems to me  
and how I want to hold the entire world away from  
them so that they would never be harmed

and yet here so many see their loved ones dead lying in  
ditches stretched in the dirt lying in the road and  
there the day burns down on them their uncovered  
bodies lie exposed, their arms spread wide, their  
faces twisted in the pain which was their last  
moments

Such great stretches of devastation, buildings of five stories  
made of poured concrete reinforced with steel their  
walls exploded into dust spray, streets are turned up  
like tar paper roofing ripped off, a building caved in  
as though stepped on by a giant boot, another  
apartment house is crushed in on one side the way  
one crumples a soda can

Where is everyone, the wind is pushing huge cumuli along  
like handfuls of froth skimmed up, radiant clouds  
towering like marble falling into themselves and  
rising up from nothing, all in silence, a sea spray of  
wind and lemon light, gulls circling in patterns,  
black in the sun glare, other birds like scraps of paper

There are oily looking pillars of black smoke from fires  
here and there in the distance, and a white smoke  
hangs over the hills

The shacks on the hillside in a poor neighborhood are  
razed, it looks like the excavation site of an ancient  
city, whole sections have become archeological ruins



in one hour, in an instant history has turned back to  
its origin before any possible story, and yet it has not  
really turned back

there are groups of people moving along the roadside in the  
dirt, their heads down as though they were uncertain  
of the ground under them

in places the earth is torn up the way a heart surgeon tears  
up a chest, roadside fields like torn open rib cages,  
roads like faces ripped by shrapnel, roads like  
arteries gaping, serum of human bodies, clots of  
debris piles, scabs of burning buildings streaming  
with black smoke cut through by orange flames

at the very end of a street of gray stone walls there is an  
empty façade -- is it a church? -- that is like the open  
door of a furnace, intense fire within it

Is there a war, is there a war on the earth? and yet what is at  
war with men and with women, what is at war with  
children wandering disoriented and screaming, their  
arms held out?

Piles of stones and bricks, an entire bedroom almost intact  
lies exposed to the blue sky, a red coverlet on the  
bed, there are packs of dogs wandering, there are  
people running here and there shouting pointing  
waving, some stand around doing nothing

there is a woman with thick braided hair, firm beautiful  
arms, Asian cheekbones, a broad flat nose, African  
lips full like the sections of an orange, skin like  
amber and dark honey, and the oval eyes of the  
Europeans

there is a woman lying amid the pieces of a floor broken  
up, a blue gray dust as thick as flour is over her arms  
and on her face, her braided hair is covered with it,  
she seems to be swimming through a surf of crushed  
white stone, she is the only survivor of the room that  
has collapsed around her, that she is crawling out of,  
as she looks up into the camera, as she looks up into  
my face your face

in another photograph there is a human hand in the left  
lower corner of the picture, there is nothing else,  
there is a large stone near it, the camera itself sits on  
the bare ground, there is debris from a wall, there is a  
brown bag of some kind and there is a blue shirt on  
the ground, the person cannot be seen but the hand is  
there

it is the hand of a man -- middle-aged, slender, dark brown  
-- covered with gray dust and bits of a brick wall,  
who was this man, what was his name, what was his  
history, a world was in this man's head, a world of  
landscapes and of places and times, a confluence of  
stories intermingling like the gulf stream itself, the  
stories of the entire globe of human beings

for if we could follow out every thread of this history and  
all the branchings of it, the whole system of streams  
would carry us around the world like the gulf stream  
itself, like the deepest currents in the ocean

and if we could hear the voices that were in this memory  
this mind and the voices in their minds and the voices  
in theirs, we would hear the voices of the entire  
world

and now this mind is over with, it is gone, it will never  
come back in the entire future history of life on earth,

this hand will never move again, this face will never  
again be seen, this voice will never again be heard  
speaking the French of the island of Haiti

There are storefronts with eyes torn out, open skulls gaping  
the brains exposed their faces smashed in their teeth  
in shatters of glass like breakers of crushed ice  
spewed over the sidewalk, where a draught of brown  
rats streams through scattering

the palm trees pulse like hearts they tick like clocks behind  
a black iron fence, the colonial building behind has  
fallen in on itself, the roof collapsed in three places, a  
row of white boxes like frosted cakes set out, the  
palm trees washing the air that moves them, the hills  
in the background flowing low and lead colored, the  
roofs have collapsed as though someone had broken  
them like crackers into a cup of soup, like white  
crumbly biscuits

the white sidewalk in the foreground, the black lamppost,  
how the people stand around looking almost  
normal, walking by as though it were an ordinary  
day, and yet each one of them knows those who are  
dead who died yesterday who died this morning last  
night who will die this afternoon, whose lives have  
just disappeared from the earth and will never again  
be known there, whose faces will never again be seen

A young man in light blue jeans is carried by four others,  
his white shirt is stained with a deep red at one  
shoulder and along his collar, the precise planes in  
his face, the high cheekbones the broad flat nose, are  
absolutely noble

there is a crimson gash over his left eye, he cries out in pain

and asks to be set back down onto the street that is  
gritty with white powder where now his right hand --  
long slender fingers like those of an artist -- is resting

a woman of twenty-five in black shorts and a pink satin  
blouse lies across the trunk of a car, a young man  
scoops up her legs and bare feet, the soles are dusty,  
she is dazed and floppy as though she were dizzy  
drunk

inside a garage five men are lying on the concrete floor,  
how long has it been since they have had any water  
to drink, how long has it been since they have had  
any food, how long has it been that this one who lies  
with legs apart both knees flat on the floor his two  
feet pointing limply in opposite directions his dark  
blue pants soaked with blood below the knees so that  
they seem to be painted with brown paint how long  
has this man been like this, and these others with  
him, and this one woman who is holding a small  
child to her chest looking around exhausted worried  
her mind spinning with terror her heart jumping at  
the slightest sound, how long have these people been  
miserable like this, who has let this happen, how  
many of them will be dead by the end of the day the  
week the month the year, who has let this happen

on another street a father carries his daughter away from  
the collapsed building, she is a girl of about ten, her  
thin arms are around his shoulders, her legs are  
around his waist, she buries her face against his  
shoulder, and his arms are thick and muscular and  
he carries her easily, but the strain of worry is in his  
face and you can feel the fear in both of them

How great the love of the father for the daughter, how  
tormented with fear and anxiety, how he would like

to push the entire world away from her small body,  
how the chaotic and half destroyed city swarms with  
dangers of every kind, each one of which he can  
easily foresee, so few of which she knows anything  
about

How much he loves her, what will become of this girl you  
wonder, why do they not have more help? who has  
let this go on, who has let this happen?

And I see one young girl of about fifteen in the pleated  
old-fashioned skirt of a traditional high school, a  
white cotton blouse, a dark blue tie with a white  
stripe across it, it is the uniform of the school that she  
attends, and yet the stripe is her own unique touch,  
and I think will this girl be dead in a few days in a  
few weeks of an infection, of a skull fracture from a  
caved in roof, will this girl be dead in a few months  
of dehydration or dysentery, will this girl be raped  
and killed in a few months a few weeks a few days  
by bands of looters or by soldiers from this country  
or from that country?

And yet here she is now alive fifteen sixteen seventeen  
years old, she does a little pirouette around, her arms  
spread wide as though to say, Look at it all, in  
wonder in amazement, her tie flaps as she turns, she  
is slim and graceful, how beautiful she is, this one  
unknown girl who yet does in fact have a name, and I  
wonder what it could be, who has a father and a  
mother, and I wonder where they are, who has a  
history and a language, a living mind and body, who  
has a future and a destiny, but what is that destiny  
and how long is that future?

The people come out slowly from the rubble along the street, the gutted buildings have chunks of debris before them and the men and women are covered with white dust and gray dust, but now there is something amazing

someone is handing out water in bottles, someone is handing out medicine in packages, someone is handing out lunches in small white boxes, someone is handing out soap and white towels

and now someone is loading medical equipment onto a cargo plane, three men work together wearing bright blue uniforms with orange tea shirts, wearing gray uniforms with yellow trim, wearing ochre field jackets with black trousers, they hand large heavy boxes to each other stacking them in the bay of the aircraft, they check the fastenings on their gear and portable equipment, they stand in straight rows hands behind their back taking instructions, they haul yellow plastic lockers of supplies onto dollies and drag them across the bright airfield toward the plane, it takes five men to move one of them

they are loading the air craft in Venezuela the aircraft in England the air craft in Taiwan the aircraft in Los Angeles, and the British men have pale angular faces they are quiet and grave, and the Venezuelan men have rounded faces they are talking and energetic, and the Taiwanese men have quiet thoughtful faces they are orderly and calm, and the American men have athletic determined faces they are moving forcefully across the tarmac

someone is treating a woman who has fainted at an emergency shelter, the medic supports the back of her head and another takes her pulse, they are careful

and precise, efficient and knowledgeable

someone has pulled a young man from the collapsed hotel where he was trapped for 11 days, he is lying on an aluminum stretcher, there is a plastic oxygen mask on his face secured by a dark green band, an iv tube in one arm, a monitor clipped to one of his fingers, his clothes are covered with white dust, he is still alive now but what will he be in a week in a month in a year? why is there not more help, who has allowed this to go on?

It is night and the tents are pitched in the field on the edge of the city, the darkness cannot be seen through, it is like deep water, the rectangles of the tents are like tiles walling out the blackness of the field that stretches out formless into the beyond of the tropical night, the feeling of the sea is everywhere, it is like is a kind of restlessness

there are small lights that illuminate the low maze of tents making their wedge-like openings amber and dim yellow, there is the smell of cigarette smoke sometimes, there is a flashlight beaming across, and mysteriously now there is laughter and even more mysterious still it is contagious laughter, and there are couples together very quietly in this tent and in that one and wry comments about it or shouted comments coarse and insulting with squalls of profanity and some fights just barely avoided, but for that everyone is too tired

there are soft voices and some cries low and continuous of women or of old men moaning in discomfort in pain

— real, severe -- and nothing to be done except the soothing voice of a daughter or of a son-in-law, there is the scream of a child every now and then, sharp and strident tearing through the dark's fabric

and the tent bandages shift slightly in the darkness, the body of humanity tries to heal itself in its still fevered rest, and far overhead the stars are numerous, the constellations shine clear and very low, as though one could reach up to touch them

How many people are gathered here now, thousands and thousands, and their voices low and restless troubled worried fill up the amphitheater of the silence all around, something is being prepared here, everyone can feel this but no one knows what it will be, something is being set in motion here, everyone can feel this, but no one can say where it will lead

but there is exhaustion , heavy as dust, as well, there is pain and thirst and fatigue, so much that one could never sleep, so great that one could never stay awake, and in fact at last everyone does sleep, the night takes in the sleepers in their tents, the stars move over them infinitely far away yet seeming to be very close, the wind from the sea is steady low and fresh, strength builds up among the people slowly despite everything

And then it is morning, the sun of the deepest waters is born far in the depths of the sky, the sun fills the sky but it does so very slowly, and molten aluminum pours through the strips of burnt paper that are the palm trees



the palm trees stroke the sun's face, their mop heads wash  
the sky's window, but it will not yet come clean,  
bright clouds float in their soapy pail

people in the bright new sunlight are crowding, they are  
wearing red shirts and blue, they are wearing the  
bright colors of their island, they are crowding  
around, they are feeling a new strength building up  
inside of them, it is something new and yet it is very  
old, it is something that no one understands and yet it  
is something that all can understand

the people in the bright sunlight are crowding, they are  
crowding in the streets and in the plazas, in the  
courtyards and in the alleyways, they are crowding  
on the steps of the public buildings, on the steps of  
the university and in front of the police stations and  
in front of the office buildings down town and in  
front of the banks

they are crowding in front of the presidential palace, the  
wind from the sea is building up with them, the palm  
trees overhead move and pulse like hearts beating,  
like clocks ticking, the sky streams with light, the  
surging of the crowds has the feeling of the sea and  
of the wind that flows through the plazas and the  
streets through the corridors of the city through the  
alleys and the squares the parks and the courtyards,  
through the places where business is done and the  
places where decisions are considered, the places of  
the people as they come out of their tents and into the  
new city that is opening up in front of them

the people in the bright sunlight are crowding, they are  
wearing red shirts and dresses, they are wearing  
white and blue and green, they are wearing the colors  
of their island, their land, their world

and in another street the people are crowding restless,  
waiting for help that has not come yet and that will  
not be coming, and what has come so far has not  
been nearly enough and even now some of it has  
gone back to the untouched countries beyond the  
horizon, the horizon that is strangely bright, the sky  
that is strangely blue

and in another street the people are crowding milling  
around restless and waiting hungry thirsty and tired,  
the lampposts stand straight and untouched like  
some upright sticks left after a fire, and the people  
standing around waiting are like the charred  
remnants of a fire

the house has collapsed all around them the buildings have  
fallen in the way that logs fall into themselves, and  
these people are the charred cinders left at the  
bottom, they exist in an intense knowledge now, it is  
like an aura that is all around them

Some walk past flowing through the square quickly as  
though on a march, and yet where are they going,  
there is nowhere to go, the fire that is burning here  
takes up everything, the fire that is burning here has  
become everything, it is this entire place itself, it is  
the streets that twist into each other, torn with  
cracks and fissures, half buried under quarries full  
of stone and concrete, it is the split apart buildings  
like calved icebergs, the blaze that is the lead green  
hills hazing with sunlight the cumuli high above like  
columns of marble falling silently, the fire that is  
here has become everything, it screams up through  
the empty alleyways where there are only dogs, it  
cries out from the smashed storefronts from the open  
lips of the parched faces shouting up into the sky for  
water for the medicine that does not come for the

bandages that are not there for the sutures the  
syringes the clean dressings and the antiseptic, and  
the fire that is here is invisible all around these  
survivors these charred remnants

see them walking through it, see how some of them open  
their arms wide as though greeting someone, some of  
them walking down the crowding streets opening  
their arms wide just to feel that they are alive, it is a  
nearly horrifying gesture and yet they do it anyway

some of them open their arms wide embracing the light  
that fills the empty spaces of the streets the court  
yards the public squares the plazas, the light that is  
all around them that is not part of the fire, the light  
that is all around them that is separate from the fire

The light that is all around them fills them with a different  
splendor, how beautiful they are these charred  
remnants of people, these proven and hardened in the  
fire that is surging all around, that rages up from the  
mouths of the tortured men and women, that rages up  
from the babies dying of dehydration and dysentery,  
that rages up from the shanty towns shimmering  
beneath a crust of blinding aluminum, but the dark  
people the strong people the great people burned  
black and hardened in the fire walk through it

they are walking through the fire they are opening their  
arms wide they are embracing the light instead, the  
light that is not part of the fire that is burning all  
around them, it is almost intolerable to see, they do it  
anyway

And I am coming to see you

I am coming to see you in the destroyed city in the streets  
of rubble in the emergency clinics and

I am coming to see you in the field of tents in the shanty  
town of tin shacks that now is just a vast junk yard

And I am coming to see you in the remnants of buildings  
where you congregate avoiding bands of looters  
avoiding bands of soldiers, and I am coming to see  
you in the public squares seething with crowds  
seething with anger

For the awakening of the entire people, all souls of the  
people all bodies of the people all minds of the  
people, I am speaking to you

For the awakening of the entire people, all souls of the  
people all bodies of the people all minds of the  
people, I am writing to you

For the awakening of the entire people, all souls of the  
people all bodies of the people all minds of the  
people, I am sending you this message

I am writing to you from a distant country, it is not very far  
away and yet it is very far

I am writing to you from a distant country, from where I  
am seeing you, watching you, hearing about you

I am writing to you from a distant country, it is where I am  
waiting for some news of you, waiting to find out  
about you, waiting for your story



## AFTERWORD

### Encounters With the Author in Taipei

We first made the author's acquaintance at a well-known restaurant in Taipei, the Wysteria Tea House, famous as having been a meeting place for dissident intellectuals in the years of political struggle in Taiwan. During the recent effort to publish his rather extensive work, we had occasion to discuss aspects of his past and current writing.

*Your poetry is quite varied in style and in form. Where do you locate yourself in the overall debate concerning poetic form?*

I consider myself an eclectic. The main thing for me is to grasp, mentally, a certain object -- that is, an experience, a scene, an event -- to see it and feel it. Any language that seems to convey the reality of that is good, any which remains merely language, merely words, is for me of no interest, in some cases it is actively negative, in the sense of being obstructive.

*A cliché?*

Yes or not even a cliché but in a way worse than that. Much of our language obscures the nature of reality. Words in themselves are, in a sense, the enemy of writing. I tell students that all the time. Words most often merely convey the usual accepted social understanding. Writing is for the purpose of grasping reality itself, which is always something other than the social understanding.

*Do you consider yourself a political writer?*

All writing is political in the sense of attempting to correct these false social understandings. At times its purpose is to merely

reveal with a new freshness, a perceptual freshness, as it were. But even this itself has a certain basic political significance, in the sense that awakened human beings will act and think differently than those who are at rest in the normal tranquilized non-perception that we usually are caught up in.

*Does living outside the United States help or hinder your writing?*

I think it helps, in general. It is in some ways a very undeveloped culture, yet in other ways it is overbearing. (The US, that is.) There is, for example, a great deal of rather stifling political correctness, as it's called, and to get away from that is itself a positive thing. For a while I had no idea how I would ever get all this material published, especially if you're not there trying to do all the "networking" that is needed, and which I was absolutely terrible at anyway -- worse than terrible, I really had no clue, I still don't, I suppose. And then it came about that you could just do it all by yourself, by means of the internet.

*How much material is it? It's quite a lot, it would seem.*

Yes, I guess it's about 40 volumes or so. Over 2,000 pages, if you want to measure it like that. I don't know how much it would weigh.

*There seem to be many styles represented. Was that something you consciously strove for?*

Yes. I always wanted to be able to represent a wide variety of experiences. My first models for the artist were people such as Picasso, Goethe, Bach -- artists who could work in a very wide range of forms and even use widely different styles. Of course, I can't compare myself to people like that, but it was still a goal, to try many types of things.

*What sorts of things are you working on currently?*

Well as you know I am trying to get all this existing work published, going through it, touching it up here and there, proofreading, and so forth. After that, I think I might return to some translating work -- Holderlin especially, and some Chinese poets, but don't ask me which ones.

*All right, but can you say whether they are modern or classical?*

Classical. My favorite is Mung Hao-Ren, actually.

*There are many other things to talk about, but perhaps that's a good note to end on for now. But what were you trying to do in this poem in particular?*

I wrote the poem in January and February of 2010, shortly after the disaster happened. I got my information from the internet, all of the scenes described were things I saw on youtube. It was a kind of direct and spontaneous reaching out to these people. I think it expresses the paradox of the modern citizen, enabled to know of things with great immediacy, but unable to do anything. And yet perhaps that is not completely the case.





### About the Author

Steven Frattali is an expatriate American writer living in Taipei. He is the author to date of over 40 volumes of poetry, totaling over 2,000 pages of work. He is also the author of several critical works, among them *Person, Place and World: A Late Modern Reading of Robert Frost* and *Hypodermic Light: The Poetry of Philip Lamantia and the Question of Surrealism*.

### About the Banyan Press of Taipei

The Banyan Press of Taipei was founded in 2008 by Samuel Palmer and Steven Frattali. It plans to publish the work of expatriate Anglophone writers of the Pacific Rim who are working outside the norms of mainstream publishing. The Press does not at this time invite submissions, but it hopes to do so in the future.